

The Art of Being a Great IT Leader

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By Charles Araujo

In my last two *CIO Insight* articles, I first called out to all IT professionals [to become IT leaders](#) and next described [the four roles of the new IT leader](#). But what does that word—leader—really mean? Leadership may be both the most written about and most discussed term in the modern business lexicon—and yet the most widely misunderstood.

I am as guilty as anyone when it comes to throwing around the term. I often catch myself talking about “senior leadership” when what I am really talking about is the senior management team. Yes, too many of us are guilty of using the terms “management” and “leadership” interchangeably. But they are not interchangeable. While we may hope that our senior executives are leaders, we have all experienced far too many executives who were the exact opposite. At the same time, we are entering an era in which leadership skills must be present at every level of an organization, not just with senior management. So, what does it mean to be a great IT leader?

I sat down recently with Cameron Cosgrove, vice president of application development for First American. We got together to discuss the recent efforts with DevOps, but instead I got a master class in leadership. As Cameron and I talked, it occurred to me that while there is a certain amount of “art” to leadership, there are also a clear set of practices that one can internalize and adopt to make themselves a better leader. Specifically, I observed four key elements of the art of leadership, as demonstrated by Cameron and his work at First American, and I think they are something we can all learn from.

Great Leaders Are Visionaries

When we hear the word “visionary” we tend to think in terms of big thinkers, people who change the world. They appear to be a rarified breed of human. If the challenge is for each of us to become IT leaders, then we can’t all be expected to be this kind of rare visionary, can we? But I think of a visionary as something different. I see a visionary as someone who simply has a vision of a future somehow unimagined by others and who is willing to share that vision and lead others

toward it. The vision doesn't necessarily have to be the "change the world" variety or operate on a grand scale to be powerful.

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When Cameron started at First American, he had a vision. It was both simple and powerful. He saw his purpose as creating an IT organization that was stable and executed flawlessly so the CIO could be the Chief Innovation Officer, constantly looking for ways to leverage IT to generate new revenue and growth opportunities. He then translated that vision into meaningful and tactical goals that his team could understand. He used this vision as a rallying cry to inspire those around him. He began to hold leadership meetings in which he sought share his vision, inspire teams to get involved and teach leadership skills to his management team. Soon others in the organization began to join in. Not because they had to or because they were told to, but because they wanted to be a part of it.

If you think of someone who was a great leader in your life they are almost always someone who inspired you to accomplish more than you imagined possible—and who helped you be more than you realized you could be. They did not do it by telling you what to do. They did not spoon-feed you little tasks and then micromanage you. They dreamed out loud. They shared a vision of a future that they believed was possible. And they inspired you to want to be a part of that future. And so, without being asked, you showed up. You went above and beyond simply because you believed in what you were doing. And you shared the vision with others. That's what it means to be a visionary. It doesn't have to be "change the world" big, but it is the only thing that truly has the power to change everything. And it is something that each and every one of us has the power to do.

Great Leaders are Servants

If you've read my book *The Quantum Age of IT*, you know that I am a big believer in the concept of "servant leadership." While the concept has existed for thousands of years, it is often misunderstood. We tend to think of servants in a derogatory fashion. But being a servant simply means that you seek to be of service to others. Embedded in the idea of servant leadership is the foundational principle of humility. In its simplest form, a great leader understands that what they can achieve alone is extremely limited and that their vision can only be realized through the efforts of others. And they know that if the vision is to be realized, they must enable and empower others to be successful.

I remember the day when I was a young manager and my CIO pulled me aside. I was new to the position, and she asked if we could talk. I am not sure what I had expected, but I know it wasn't what unfolded next. "I want you to know that I have a very important job," she began. Ok, I knew where this was going; this was the "make sure you remember who is boss" talk. "My job," she continued, "is to make sure that you have whatever you need to do your job. And to make

sure that any of the political stuff stops with me so that you can focus on getting the job done.” I frankly have no idea how I responded. I was in shock. Here was a senior IT executive, my boss, someone that I respected enormously, telling me that in her eyes, she worked for me. That she was there to serve my work needs so that the vision for the organization could be realized. It was a powerful moment and one that had a tremendous impact on me.

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As Cameron explained to me that he saw his job as taking care of operations so his boss could focus on the more strategic issues, I saw the same type of servant leadership I’d experienced earlier as a young manager. As a leader, you must see yourself as being in the service of everyone around you—certainly those who work for you, but also your peers and managers. It’s an attitude that projects humility and commitment. It gives people hope, courage and enough faith to be willing to step up and accomplish things they didn’t know they were capable of accomplishing.

Great Leaders Are Accountable

Leadership is about more than just inspiring people. In the end, leaders are judged by what they and their teams accomplish. Inspiration is the fuel that powers achievement, but it also takes discipline and commitment to weather the difficult times that beset any ambitious undertaking. A great leader knows that type of commitment requires mutual accountability. First and foremost, a leader must be willing to hold him or herself accountable to their teams. They cannot see themselves as “above the law” or beyond any reproach. They must operate with complete transparency with their teams in order to establish the level of trust and commitment that is needed in strong teams. But more than that, great leaders require their teams to be accountable to each other.

There is power in a team that is inspired by a leader and willing to work toward a collective vision. But there is much more power in a team that shares that vision among themselves and feels accountable to each other as they mutually pursue a goal. Cameron explained that when he launches a significant effort, he has the team draft a team agreement in which the team outlines their commitments to each other. Next, Cameron has each of them sign it. The team agreement is a visible statement of their level of commitment and accountability. By first submitting yourself as accountable to your team and then leading your team to be accountable to each other, you create a fraternal environment in which your team will go from being a mere collection of people to a single body—almost a family—that is pursuing a single goal.

Great Leaders Are Personal

At one point while Cameron and I were enjoying our lunch, he called over the waiter. Cameron pointed to a table across the patio and, handing the waiter a credit card, told him that he wanted

to pay for their lunch without them knowing who had done it. The table included members of his release management team, and he simply wanted to give them a little tangible recognition for doing their jobs well day in and day out. As Cameron had waved to them earlier, I have no doubt that they later put two and two together. Nevertheless, it exemplified one of the characteristics that I think prevents some good leaders from being great leaders.

Some leaders are revered. Some are admired. But the greatest leaders are those that while being both revered and admired, also build deep and personal relationships with their coworkers. They are not aloof or placed on a lofty pedestal. They do not stay locked in their quiet ivory tower, day-in only appearing to occasionally address the minions. Instead, great leaders live in the trenches and work aside their teams. They also invest in their teams on a personal level. They are approachable and go out of their way to make themselves accessible. Inspiration is great. Accountability builds trust. But more than anything else, people will walk to the proverbial end of the earth for people who know them, have invested in them and believe in them.

We are entering a new and exciting era for IT professionals. Leadership will be in great demand and short supply. But I believe there is a great IT leader in each of us. There is an art to great leadership, but it is an art you can learn. Make a commitment to become a great IT leader, and learn the art of leadership. It will make all the difference.

About the Author

*Charles Araujo is the founder and CEO of [The IT Transformation Institute](#), which is dedicated to helping IT leaders transform their teams into customer-focused, value-driven learning organizations. He is the author of the book *The Quantum Age of IT: Why Everything You Know About IT is About to Change*, is presently at work on two new books. Araujo is also the creator of *DeepRoots*, an organizational change methodology designed for IT teams. He frequently speaks and writes on a wide range of subjects related to his vision of the future of IT. You can follow him on Twitter as @charlesaraujo.*